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Teaching Notes

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John Calvin on the Prayer Life of the Believer



I. The Nature and Value of Prayer (*Institutes 3.20.1-3*)

A. Faith and Prayer

1. God is seeking to teach us to forsake self-reliance:

From those matters so far discussed, we clearly see how destitute and devoid of all good things man is, and how he lacks all aids to salvation. Therefore, if he seeks resources to succor him in his need, he must go outside himself and get them elsewhere. It was afterward explained to us that the Lord willingly and freely reveals himself in his Christ. For in Christ he offers all happiness in place of our misery, all wealth in place of our neediness; in him he opens to us the heavenly treasures that our whole faith may contemplate his beloved Son, our whole expectation depend upon him, and our whole hope cleave to and rest in him.

2. As soon as we are instructed by the gospel that God has hidden all His treasures in Christ, faith exercises itself immediately in prayer... and will do so for the rest of our lives
3. To neglect prayer is foolish

Otherwise, to know God as the master and bestower of all good things, who invites us to request them of him, and still not go to him and not ask of him – this would be of as little profit as for a man to neglect a treasure, buried and hidden in the earth, after it had been pointed out to him.

4. Scripture testifies quite plainly that prayer is of the essence of the child of God's life of faith

Accordingly, the apostle, in order to show that true faith cannot be indifferent about calling upon God, has laid down this order: just as faith is born from the gospel, so through it our hearts are trained to call upon God's name [Romans 10:14-17]. And this is precisely what he had said a little before: the Spirit of adoption, who seals the witness of the gospel in our hearts [Romans 8:16], raises up our spirits to dare show forth to God their desires, to stir up unspeakable groanings [Romans 8:26], and confidently cry, "Abba! Father!" [Romans 8:15].

B. The Necessity of Prayer

1. God has hidden treasures of blessing which can only be dug up by prayer

It is, therefore, by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the Heavenly Father. ... Therefore we see that to us nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord, which we are not also bidden to ask

of him in prayers. So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord's gospel, and which our faith has gazed upon.

2. Prayer is absolutely necessary to receive these blessings

Words fail to explain how necessary prayer is, and in how many ways the exercise of prayer is profitable. Surely, with good reason the Heavenly Father affirms that the only stronghold of safety is in calling upon his name [cf. Joel 2:32]. By so doing we invoke the presence both of his providence, through which he watches over and guards our affairs, and of his power, through which he sustains us, weak as we are and well-nigh overcome, and of his goodness, through which he receives us, miserably burdened with sins, unto grace; and, in short, it is by prayer that we call him to reveal himself as wholly present to us. Hence comes an extraordinary peace and repose to our consciences. For having disclosed to the Lord the necessity that was pressing upon us, we even rest fully in the thought that none of our ills is hid from him who, we are convinced, has both the will and the power to take the best care of us.

C. Objection: Is Not Prayer Superfluous? Six Reasons for Prayer

Calvin here addresses the question of the relationship between God in His sovereignty and omniscience on the one hand, and the strange "necessity" of prayer on the other:

But, someone will say, does God not know, even without being reminded, both in what respect we are troubled and what is expedient for us, so that it may seem in a sense superfluous that he should be stirred up by our prayers — as if he were drowsily blinking or even sleeping until he is aroused by our voice? But they who thus reason do not observe to what end the Lord instructed his people to pray, for he ordained it not so much for his own sake as for ours.

Therefore, even though, while we grow dull and stupid toward our miseries, he watches and keeps guard on our behalf, and sometimes even helps us unasked, still it is very important for us to call upon him

Calvin then gives six reasons for prayer:

1. To teach us to live a life of God-centered service while learning to flee to Him with every need

First, that our hearts may be fired with a zealous and burning desire ever to seek, love, and serve him, while we become accustomed in every need to flee to him as to a sacred anchor.

2. To purify our desires

Secondly, that there may enter our hearts no desire and no wish at all of which we should be ashamed to make him a witness, while we learn to set all our wishes before his eyes, and even to pour out our whole hearts.

3. To prepare our hearts to receive His blessings with thankfulness, acutely aware that all blessings come from His hand

Thirdly, that we be prepared to receive his benefits with true gratitude of heart and thanksgiving, benefits that our prayer reminds us come from his hand [cf. Psalm 145:15-16].

4. [After God grants our requests] To enhance our ardent meditation on God's kindness

Fourthly, moreover, that, having obtained what we were seeking, and being convinced that he has answered our prayers, we should be led to meditate upon his kindness more ardently.

5. To love the gifts He gives more ardently

And fifthly, that at the same time we embrace with greater delight those things which we acknowledge to have been obtained by prayers.

6. To confirm in our hearts the doctrine of providence

Finally, that use and experience may, according to the measure of our feebleness, confirm his providence, while we understand not only that he promises never to fail us, and of his own will opens the way to call upon him at the very point of necessity, but also that he ever extends his hand to help his own, not wet-nursing them with words but defending them with present help.

Amazingly, God's seeming inactivity is designed to lead us to prayer:

On account of these things, our most merciful Father, although he never either sleeps or idles, still very often gives the impression of one sleeping or idling in order that he may thus train us, otherwise idle and lazy, to seek, ask, and entreat him to our great good.

So, we must never use the doctrine of God's sovereign providence to reduce our prayers, but only to encourage them all the more!

II. The Rules of Right Prayer (*Institutes 3.20.4-16*)

A. Rule #1: Reverence (3.20.4-5)

1. Devout detachment required for conversation with God

This we shall indeed attain with respect to the mind if it is freed from carnal cares and thoughts by which it can be called or led away from right and pure contemplation of God, and then not only devotes itself completely to prayer but also, in so far as this is possible, is lifted and carried beyond itself. Now I do not here require the mind to be so detached as never to be pricked or gnawed by vexations, since, on the contrary, great anxiety should kindle in us the desire to pray. Thus we see that God's saintly servants give proof of huge torments, not to say vexations, when they speak of uttering their plaintive cry to the Lord from the deep abyss, and from the very jaws of death [cf. Psalm 130:1]. But I say that we are to rid ourselves of all alien and outside cares, by which the mind, itself a wanderer, is borne about hither and thither, drawn away from heaven, and pressed down to earth.

2. Against undisciplined and irreverent prayer (the "wandering mind")

These two matters are well worth attention: first, whoever engages in prayer should apply to it his faculties and efforts, and not, as commonly happens, be distracted by wandering thoughts. For nothing is more contrary to reverence for God than the levity that marks an excess of frivolity utterly devoid of awe. In this matter, the harder we find concentration to be, the more strenuously we ought to labor after it. For no one is so intent on praying that he does not feel many irrelevant thoughts stealing upon him, which either break the course of prayer or delay it by some winding bypath. But here let us recall how unworthy it is, when God admits us to intimate conversation, to abuse his great kindness by mixing sacred and profane

Calvin says the best way to stop your mind from wandering is to immerse yourself in a sense of wonder, awe, and majesty at the greatness of the Person you are addressing; to lift up your hands and heart and eyes and face ... the upward direction should remind you of God's infinite majesty

Also Calvin says we must learn to confine our prayers to those things which God has said He wills to give us... confine your prayers to His revealed will in Scripture:

1 John 5:14-15 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. ¹⁵ And if we know that he hears us-- whatever we ask-- we know that we have what we asked of him.

3. The Holy Spirit aids right prayer

But because our abilities are far from able to match such perfection, we must seek a remedy to help us. As we must turn keenness of mind toward God, so affection of heart has to follow. Both, indeed, stand far beneath; nay, more truly, they faint and fail, or are carried in the opposite direction. Therefore, in order to minister to this weakness, God gives us the Spirit as our teacher in prayer, to tell us what is right and temper our emotions. For, "because we do

not know how to pray as we ought, the Spirit comes to our help,” and “intercedes for us with unspeakable groans” [Romans 8:26]

B. Rule #2: Pray from a sincere sense of want and with penitence (3.20.6-7)

1. The sense of need that excludes all unreality

Let this be the second rule: that in our petitions we ever sense our own insufficiency, and earnestly pondering how we need all that we seek, join with this prayer an earnest – nay, burning – desire to attain it. For many perfunctorily intone prayers after a set form, as if discharging a duty to God. And although they admit it to be a necessary remedy for their ills, because it would be fatal to lack the help of God which they are beseeching, still it appears that they perform this duty from habit, because their hearts are meanwhile cold, and they do not ponder what they ask.

...

Now what do we account more hateful or even execrable to God than the fiction of someone asking pardon for his sins, all the while either thinking he is not a sinner or at least not thinking he is a sinner? Unquestionably something in which God himself is mocked!

2. Is prayer at times dependent upon our passing mood?

If anyone should object that we are not always urged with equal necessity to pray, I admit it. And to our benefit James gives us this distinction: “Is anyone among you sad? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing” [James 5:13 p.]. Therefore common sense itself dictates that, because we are too lazy, God pricks us the more sharply, as occasion demands, to pray earnestly. David calls this a “seasonable time” [Psalm 32:6] because, as he teaches in many other passages [e.g., Psalm 94:19], the more harshly troubles, discomforts, fears, and trials of other sorts press us, the freer is our access to him, as if God were summoning us to himself.

At the same time Paul’s statement is no less true, that we must “pray at all times” [Ephesians 6:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:17]. For however much after our heart’s desire affairs may prosperously flow and occasion for happiness surround us on all sides, still there is no point of time when our need does not urge us to pray. A certain man has abundant wine and grain. Since he cannot enjoy a single morsel of bread apart from God’s continuing favor, his wine cellars and granaries will not hinder him from praying for his daily bread. Now if we should consider how many dangers at every moment threaten, fear itself will teach us that we at no single time may leave off praying.

C. Rule #3: Yield all confidence in ourselves and humbly plead for pardon (3.20.8-10)

1. Come as humble suppliants for mercy

To this let us join a third rule: that anyone who stands before God to pray, in his humility giving glory completely to God, abandon all thought of his own glory, cast off all notion of his own worth, in fine, put away all self-assurance – blest if we claim for ourselves anything, even the least bit, we should become vainly puffed up, and perish at his presence. We have repeated examples of this submission, which levels all haughtiness, in God’s servants; each one of whom, the holier he is, the more he is cast down when he presents himself before the Lord. Thus spoke Daniel, whom the Lord himself commended with so great a title: “We do not pour forth our prayers unto thee on the ground of our righteousness but on the ground of thy great mercy. O Lord, hear us; O Lord, be kindly unto us. Hear us, and do what we ask... for your own sake... because your name is called upon over your people, and over your holy place” [Daniel 9:18-19]

2. The plea for forgiveness of sins in the most important part of prayer

To sum up: the beginning, and even the preparation, of proper prayer is the plea for pardon with a humble and sincere confession of guilt. Nor should anyone, however holy he may be, hope that he will obtain anything from God until he is freely reconciled to him; nor can God chance to be propitious to any but those whom he has pardoned. Accordingly, it is no wonder if believers open for themselves the door to prayer with this key

...

But besides that special confession of present guilt, with which believers plead for the remission of every sin and penalty, the general preface that gains favor for prayers must never be passed over, for unless they are founded in free mercy, prayers never reach God. John’s statement can be applied to this: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive... and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” [1 John 1:9].

3. Can we ever refer to our own righteousness?

Now the saints sometimes seem to shout approval of their own righteousness in calling upon God for help. For example, David says: “Keep my life, for I am good” [Psalm 86:2 p.]; and similarly, Hezekiah: “Remember... O Lord, I beseech thee, how I have walked before thee in truth... and have done what is good in thy sight” [2 Kings 20:3 p.; cf. Isaiah 38:3]. By such expressions they mean nothing else but that by their regeneration itself they are attested as servants and children of God to whom he promises that he will be gracious. He teaches through the prophet, as we have already seen that his eyes “are upon the righteous, his ears toward their prayers” [Psalm 34:15]. Again, through the apostle John: “We shall receive... whatever we ask if we keep his

commandments" [1 John 3:22]. In these statements he does not set the value of prayer according to the merits of works, but he is pleased to establish the assurance of those who are duly aware of guileless uprightness and innocence, as all believers ought to be.

D. Rule #4: Pray with confident hope (3.20.11-14)

1. Hope and faith overcome fear

The fourth rule is that, thus cast down and overcome by true humility, we should be nonetheless encouraged to pray by a sure hope that our prayer will be answered. These are indeed things apparently contrary: to join the firm assurance of God's favor to a sense of his just vengeance; yet, on the ground that God's goodness alone raises up those oppressed by their own evil deeds, they very well agree together. For, in accordance with our previous teaching that repentance and faith are companions joined together by an indissoluble bond, although one of these terrifies us while the other gladdens us, so also these two ought to be present together in prayers. And David briefly expresses this agreement when he says: "I through the abundance of thy goodness will enter thy house, I will worship toward the temple of thy holiness with fear" [Psalm 5:7]

2. Prayer and faith

Christ calls this principle to the attention of all of us with this saying: "I say unto you, whatever you seek... , believe that you will receive it, and it will come to you" [Mark 11:24 p.] He confirms the same statement in another place: "Whatever you ask in prayer, believing" etc. [Matthew 21:22]. James is in accord with this: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all men simply and without reproaching... Let him ask in faith, with no wavering" [James 1:5-6]. There, opposing faith to wavering, he most appropriately expresses the force of faith. Nonetheless, what he adds must also be noted: that they who in doubt and perplexity call upon God, uncertain in their minds whether they will be heard or not, will gain nothing [cf. James 1:7]. He even compares these persons to waves that are driven and tossed hither and thither by the wind [James 1:6]. Hence, in another passage, James calls what is right and proper "the prayer of faith" [James 5:15]. Then, since God so often affirms that he will give to each one according to his faith [Matthew 8:13; 9:29; Mark 11:24], he implies that we can obtain nothing apart from faith.

To sum up, it is faith that obtains whatever is granted to prayer.

3. God's command and promise as motive for prayer

Nothing could be commanded more precisely than what is stated in the psalm: "Call upon me in the day of tribulation" [Psalm 50:15]. But because among the

duties of godliness the Scriptures commend none more frequently, I need not dwell longer on this point. "Seek," says the Master, "and you will receive; knock, and it will be opened unto you." [Matthew 7:7.] However, a promise is here also added to the precept, as is necessary; for even though all admit that the precept ought to be obeyed, still the majority would flee from God when he calls if he did not promise to be easily entreated and readily accessible.

...

So then, all the passages that keep occurring in the Scriptures, in which calling upon God is enjoined upon us, are as so many banners set up before our eyes to inspire us with confidence. It would be rashness itself to burst into God's sight if he himself had not anticipated our coming by calling us. Therefore he opens a way for us in his own words: "I will say to them, 'You are my people'; they will say to me, 'Thou art our God'" [Zechariah 13:9 p.]. We see how he precedes those who worship him, and would have them follow him, and thus not to fear for the sweetness of the melody that he himself dictates. Especially let that noble title of God come to our minds, relying upon which we shall without trouble overcome all obstacles. "O God... you who hear prayer! To you shall all flesh come." [Psalm 65:1-2.] For what is more lovely or agreeable than for God to bear this title, which assures us that nothing is more to his nature than to assent to the prayers of suppliants?

4. People should pray confidently, without terror but with reverent fear

It is strange that by promises of such great sweetness we are affected either so coldly or hardly at all, so that many of us prefer to wander through mazes and, forsaking the fountain of living waters, to dig out for ourselves dry cisterns [Jeremiah 2:13], rather than to embrace God's generosity, freely given to us. "The name of the Lord is an impregnable citadel," says Solomon; "the righteous man will flee to it and be saved." [Proverbs 18:10 p.] But Joel, after he has prophesied the frightful ruin that threatens, adds this memorable sentence: "All that call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered" [Joel 2:32; Romans 10:13]. This we know actually refers to the course of the gospel [Acts 2:21]. Scarcely one man in a hundred is moved to approach God. He himself proclaims through Isaiah: "You will call upon me and I shall hear you. Even before you call, I will answer you" [Isaiah 65:24 p.]

...

It remains for us, provided with such inducements, to know that we have from this enough evidence that he will hearken to us, inasmuch as our prayers depend upon no merit of ours, but their whole worth and hope of fulfillment are grounded in God's promises, and depend upon them, so that they need no other support, nor do they look about up and down, hither and thither. We

must therefore make up our minds that, even though we do not excel in a holiness like that which is praised in the holy patriarchs, prophets, and apostles, yet because we and they have a common command to pray and a common faith, if we rely upon God's Word, in this we are rightly their fellows. For God, as has been seen above, declaring that he will be gentle and kind to all, gives to the utterly miserable, hope that they will get what they have sought.

E. God Listens to Defective Prayers (3.20.15-16)

1. Harkening to perverted prayer

...the prayers that God grants are not always pleasing to him. But in so far as example is concerned, what Scripture teaches is revealed by clear proofs: that he helps the miserable and hearkens to the groans of those who, unjustly afflicted, implore his aid; therefore, that he executes his judgments while complaints of the poor rise up to him, although they are unworthy to receive even a trifle.

2. Our prayers can obtain an answer only through God's forgiveness

This also is worth noting: what I have set forth on the four rules of right praying is not so rigorously required that God will reject those prayers in which he finds neither perfect faith nor repentance, together with a warmth of zeal and petitions rightly conceived. I have said that, although prayer is an intimate conversation of the pious with God, yet reverence and moderation must be kept, lest we give loose rein to miscellaneous requests, and lest we crave more than God allows; further, that we should lift up our minds to a pure and chaste veneration of him, lest God's majesty become worthless for us. No one has ever carried this out with the uprightness that was due; for, not to mention the rank and file, how many complaints of David savor of intemperance! Not that he would either deliberately expostulate with God or clamor against his judgments, but that, fainting with weakness, he finds no other solace better than to cast his own sorrows into the bosom of God. But God tolerates even our stammering and pardons our ignorance whenever something inadvertently escapes us; as indeed without this mercy there would be no freedom to pray. But although David intended to submit completely to God's will, and prayed with no less patience than zeal to obtain his request, yet there come forth – sometimes, rather, boil up – turbulent emotions, quite out of harmony with the first rule that we laid down.

III. The Intercession of Christ (*Institutes* 3.20.17-20)

A. Prayer in the Name of Jesus

- B. The Risen Christ as Our Intercessor
- C. Christ the Only Mediator, Even for the Mutual Intercession of Believers
- D. Christ is the Eternal and Abiding Mediator

IV. Erroneous Doctrines of the Prayers of Saints (*Institutes 3.20.21-27*)

- A. One Who Takes Refuge in the Intercession of Saints Robs Christ of His Honor
- B. Veneration of Saints
- C. Confused Interpretation of Scripture Used to Support Intercession of Saints
- D. The Departed Saints Not Engaged in Earthly Cares
- E. Invocation of the Names of the Patriarchs Not Relevant
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V. Kinds of Prayer, Public and Private (*Institutes 3.20.28-30*)

- A. Private Prayer
- B. Necessity and Danger of Public Prayer
- C. Not Church Buildings But We Ourselves Are Temples of God

VI. The Use of Singing and of the Spoken Language (*Institutes 3.20.31-33*)

- A. On Speaking and Singing in Prayer
- B. Church Singing
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VII. An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer (*Institutes 3.20.34-47*)

- A. The Lord's Prayer a Necessary Help for Us
- B. Division and Main Content
- C. "Our Father in heaven"
 - 1. Initial comments
 - 2. A form of address that should encourage us

3. A form of address that sets us in the fellowship with the brethren
4. Comparison of prayer and almsgiving
5. "... in heaven"

D. The Petitions

1. The First Petition: May your name be hallowed
2. The Second Petition: May your Kingdom come
3. The Third Petition: May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven
4. Summary of first three petitions
5. The Fourth Petition: Give us this day our daily bread
6. The Fifth Petition: Forgive our debts... as we also forgive our debtors
7. The Sixth Petition: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

E. The Conclusion

F. The Adequacy of the Lord's Prayer, and Our Freedom to Use Other Words (3.20.48-49)

1. The Lord's Prayer as a binding rule
2. The Lord's Prayer does not bind us to its form of words but to its content

VIII. Special Times of Prayer, and the Need for Perseverance (*Institutes* 3.20.50-52)

- A. Prayer at Regular Times
- B. Patient Perseverance in Prayer
- C. Unheard Prayers?

John Calvin on the Prayer Life of the Believer: Part II

I. The Nature and Value of Prayer (*Institutes 3.20.1-3*)

II. The Rules of Right Prayer (*Institutes 3.20.4-16*)

III. The Intercession of Christ (*Institutes 3.20.17-20*)

A. Prayer in the Name of Jesus

Since no man is worthy to present himself to God and come into his sight, the Heavenly Father himself, to free us at once from shame and fear, which might well have thrown our hearts into despair, has given us his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, to be our advocate [1 John 2:1] and mediator with him [1 Timothy 2:5; cf. Hebrews 8:6 and 9:15], by whose guidance we may confidently come to him, and with such an intercessor, trusting nothing we ask in his name will be denied us, as nothing can be denied to him by the Father.

1 Timothy 2:5 For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus

ESV 1 John 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Hebrews 8:6 But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises.

Hebrews 9:15 For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance-- now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

For as soon as God's dread majesty comes to mind, we cannot but tremble and be driven far away by the recognition of our own unworthiness, until Christ comes forward as intermediary, to change the throne of dreadful glory into the throne of grace. As the apostle also teaches how awe should dare with all confidence to appear, to receive mercy, and to find grace in timely help [Hebrews 4:16]. And as a rule has been established to call upon God, and a promise given that those who call upon him shall be heard, so too we are particularly bidden to call upon him in Christ's name; and we have the promise made that we shall obtain what we have asked in his name.

John 16:24 "Hitherto you have asked nothing in my name; ask and you will receive."

John 16:26 "In that day you will ask in my name"

John 14:13 "Whatever you ask... I will do it that the Father may be glorified in the Son"

Calvin also made it plain that God would not hear any prayers not prayed in this spirit, “in Jesus’ name”:

Hence it is incontrovertibly clear that those who call upon God in another name than that of Christ obstinately flout his commands and count his will as naught – indeed, have no promise of obtaining anything. Indeed, as Paul says, “all God’s promises find their yea and amen in him” [2 Corinthians 1:20]. That is, they are confirmed and fulfilled.

B. The Risen Christ as Our Intercessor

1. Calvin says that we should carefully note the time when the church was to begin praying “in His name”... namely, after His resurrection and ascension into heaven:

John 16:26 In that day you will ask in my name.

John 16:28 I came from the Father and entered the world; now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.”

[I also add these verses:

Hebrews 4:14-16 Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 10:19-22 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God...

Ephesians 3:12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

2. Old Covenant saints prayed only by the Mediator (Christ), but the shadows of the New Covenant freedom were obvious in that they had to stand far off while the priest carried their names on a breastplate into the Holy of Holies
3. The Old Covenant also taught that our prayers were only acceptable because of the blood of the sacrifice offered to purify them; Christ’s blood in the end is the only true sanctifier of prayers
4. This makes an essential unity between saints of the Old Covenant and New:

Hence we infer that God was from the beginning appeased by Christ's intercession, so that he received the petitions of the godly.

5. If this is true, why did Christ institute a new time in John 16:26?

Why, then, does Christ assign a new hour wherein his disciples shall begin to pray in his name unless it is that this grace, as it is more resplendent today, so deserves more approval among us?

[In other words, the privilege of prayer, of free access to God through Jesus Christ is even more glorious now that Christ has so obviously won the right for us by His blood]

6. If this is true, how much MORE zealous should New Covenant saints be for the privilege of prayer?!

The less excusable is our forwardness [i.e. habitual disposition to disobedience and opposition] unless we embrace with both arms, as the saying is, this truly inestimable benefit, which is destined for us alone.

C. Christ the Only Mediator, Even for the Mutual Intercession of Believers

1. If anyone tries to come to God apart from Christ, they will be completely rejected, for Christ is the only way to the Father (John 14:6)
2. Christ is constantly the only Mediator, and by Him alone can we approach God
3. BUT this doesn't mean that the saints should not pray for each other

Meanwhile, notwithstanding, the saints still retain their intercessions, whereby they commend one another's salvation to God. The apostle mentions these [1 Timothy 2:1], but all depend solely upon Christ's intercession, so far are they from detracting from his in any way. For as they gush forth from the emotion of love, in which we willingly and freely embrace one another as members of one body, so also are they related to the unity of the Head. When, therefore, those intercessions are also made in Christ's name, what else do they attest but that no one can be helped by any prayers at all save when Christ intercedes?

In other words, all prayers made for each other in Christ's name are made in effect as a subset of His constant prayers for us

4. Thus all prayers made for the saints in Christ's name add to His glory as our Mediator and Intercessor

D. Christ is the Eternal and Abiding Mediator

1. Christ did not (does not) plead for us once for all, but continually

For when John says, "If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Christ Jesus" [1 John 2:1], does he mean that Christ was an advocate for us once for all, or does he not rather ascribe to him a constant intercession? Why does Paul affirm that he "sits at the right hand of the Father and also intercedes for us" [Romans 8:34]? But when, in another passage, Paul calls him "the sole mediator between God and man" [1 Timothy 2:5], is he not referring to prayers...?

I would add this passage as the best one to teach this point:

Hebrews 7:24-25 because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. ²⁵ Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

2. And therefore all acceptable prayers made by us for each other can only reach God through the one Mediator, Christ:

The apostle Paul, although an eminent member under the Head, yet because he was a member of Christ's body, and knew that the greatest and truest priest of the church had not figuratively entered the inner precincts of the veil to the Holy of Holies but through express and steadfast truth had entered the inner precincts of heaven to a holiness real and eternal, also commends himself to the prayers of believers:

Romans 15:30 I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me.

Ephesians 6:19 Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel

Colossians 4:3 And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains.

And he does not make himself mediator between the people and God, but he asks that all members of Christ's body mutually pray for one another, "since the members are concerned for one another, and if one member suffers, the rest suffer with it" [1 Corinthians 12:25-26]. And thus the mutual prayers for one another of all members yet laboring on earth rise to the Head, who has gone before them into heaven, in whom "is propitiation for our sins" [1 John 2:2]. For if Paul were mediator, so also would the rest of the apostles be; and if there were many mediators, Paul's own statement would not stand, in which he had said: "One God, one mediator between God and men, the man Christ" [1 Tim. 2:5].

IV. Erroneous Doctrines of the Prayers of Saints (*Institutes 3.20.21-27*)

- A. One Who Takes Refuge in the Intercession of Saints Robs Christ of His Honor

1. Calvin is here dealing with the Roman Catholic practice of appealing to dead believers (saints) for intercession to God

Regarding the saints who, having died in the flesh, live in Christ, if we attribute any prayer to them, let us not even dream that they have any other way to petition God than through Christ, who alone is the way [John 14:6], or that their prayers are accepted by God in any other name.

2. The saints have no independent access to God apart from the one Mediator:

Now Scripture recalls us from all to Christ alone, and our Heavenly Father wills that all things be gathered together in him [Colossians 1:20; Ephesians 1:10]. Therefore, it was the height of stupidity, not to say madness, to be so intention gaining access through the saints as to be led away from him, apart from whom no entry lies open to them.

3. The prayers of the saints was taught by Roman Catholics as based on a “treasury of merits” (their own good works) by which they ministered grace to us here below... Calvin rejected this vigorously

To obtain God’s benevolence they repeatedly thrust forward the merits of the saints, and for the most part overlooking Christ, entreat God in their names. Is this not, I ask you, to transfer to the saints that office of sole intercession which, as we affirmed above, belongs to Christ?

4. Scripture is totally SILENT on the saints’ intercession for us
5. The yearning for the intercession of the saints comes from anxiety about earthly events, coupled with a sense that Christ is INSUFFICIENT or too terrifying to approach:

But if we appeal to the consciences of all those who delight in the intercession of the saints, we shall find that this arises solely from the fact that they are burdened by anxiety, just as if Christ were insufficient or too severe. First, by this perplexity they dishonor Christ and strip him of the title of sole Mediator, which, as it has been given to him by the Father as a unique privilege, ought not to be transferred to another. Also, by this very thing they obscure the glory of his birth, and make void the cross; [in short], they strip and deprive of its praise all that he has done or suffered!

6. And to say that Christ is too severe is to dishonor the obvious kindness and grace which He manifested to sinners while on earth

At the same time they cast out the kindness of God, who manifests himself to them as the Father. For he is not Father to them unless they recognize Christ to be their brother. This they plainly deny unless they reflect that he has brotherly affection toward themselves, than which nothing can be gentler or

more tender. Therefore Scripture offers him alone to us, sends us to him, and establishes us in him.

7. Also, once the habit of prayer to the saints gets established, Christ as Mediator and Intercessor in time of trouble gets badly obscured and soon is forgotten:

For Christ's intercession is no less profaned when mingled with prayers and merits of the dead than if it were completely omitted and dead men alone were mentioned. Then, in all their litanies, hymns, and proses, where they leave no honor unapplied to dead saints, Christ goes unmentioned.

I am reminded here of Erasmus's amusing colloquy entitled "The Shipwreck":

[Note: the Colloquies were little dialogues written like the lines of a play in which Erasmus could make sharp comments about controversial topics while hiding behind the characters in his dialogue. In "The Shipwreck," a man named "Adolph" is describing to a friend named "Antony" a horrifying experience in a terrible storm at sea... and various people on the ship are crying out in terror about to die;

Ant. What did they say?

Adol. O most merciful sea! O most generous sea! O most rich sea! O most beautiful sea, be pacified, save us; and a deal of such stuff they sang to the deaf ocean.

Ant. Ridiculous superstition! What did the rest do?

Adol. Some did nothing but spew, and some made vows. There was an Englishman there, that promised golden mountains to our Lady of Walsingham, if he could somehow but get ashore alive. Others promised a great many things to the Wood of the Cross, which was in such-and-such a place; others again, to that which was in a different Place; and the same was done by the Virgin Mary, who reigns in a great many Places, and they think the Vow is of no Effect, unless the Place be mentioned.

Ant. Ridiculous! As if the saints did not dwell in heaven.

Adol. Some made promises to become Carthusians. There was one who promised he would go a Pilgrimage to St. James at Compostella, barefoot and bare-headed, clothed in a coat of mail, and begging his bread all the way.

Ant. Did nobody make any mention of St. Christopher?

Adol. Yes, I heard one, and I could not forbear laughing, who bawling out aloud, lest St. Christopher should not hear him, promised him, who is at the top of a church at Paris, rather a mountain than a statue, a wax taper (candle) as big as he was himself: When he had bawled this out over and over as loud as he could, an acquaintance of his jogged him on the elbow, and cautioned him: "Be careful what you promise, for if you should sell all you have in the world, you will not be able to pay for it." He answered him softly, lest St. Christopher should hear him, "You fool," says he, "do you think I mean what I say?! If I once got safely to shore, I would not give St. Christopher so much as a tallow candle!"

Antony asks Adolph what **he** did in the storm to save himself:

Ant. How affliction makes men religious! In prosperity we neither think of God nor saint. But what did you do all this while? Did you not make vows to some saints?

Adol. No, none at all.

Ant. Why so?

Adol. I make no bargains with saints. For what is this but a bargain in form? I'll give you, if you do so and so; or I will do so and so, if you do so and so: I'll give you a wax taper (candle), if I swim out alive; I'll go to *Rome*, if you save me.

Ant. But did you call upon none of the saints for help?

Adol. No, not so much as that neither.

Ant. Why so?

Adol. Because heaven is a large place, and if I should recommend my Safety to any Saint, as suppose, to St. *Peter*, who perhaps, would hear soonest, because he stands at the Door; before he can come to God Almighty, or before he could tell him my Condition, I may be lost.

one of the terrified people was a Dominican monk; the dialogue goes as follows:

Ant. What became of the Dominican?

Adol. As the old priest told me, having implored the help of his saints, and stripped himself, he threw himself naked into the sea.

Ant. What saints did he call upon?

Adol. St. Dominic, St. Thomas, St. Vincent, and one of the Peters, but I can't tell which: But his chief reliance was upon Catherina of Siena.

***Ant.* Christ never came to mind??**

Adol. Not, as the old priest told me.

This is precisely Calvin's point! Christ was entirely forgotten!

B. Veneration of Saints

1. Calvin says the focus on saints can end up being a doorway back to polytheism and pagan superstitions:

But stupidity has progressed to the point that we have here a manifest disposition to superstition, which, once it has cast off the bridle, never ceases to play the wanton. For after men began to concern themselves with the intercession of saints, gradually they attributed to each a particular function, so that for a diversity of business sometimes one intercessor would be called upon, sometimes another. Then each man adopted a particular saint as a tutelary deity, in whose keeping he put his trust, Not only were gods set up according to the number of cities, something for which the prophet long ago upbraided Israel

[<240228>Jeremiah 2:28; 11:13]

, but even according to the population.

Calvin says, however, it doesn't stop there:

And finally, there are very many who do not refrain from the horrid sacrilege of calling upon the saints now not as helpers but as determiners of their salvation. Here is where wretched men fall, when they stray from their lawful position, that is, the Word of God.

Priests applaud this, because it makes money:

Prostrate before a statue or picture of Barbara, Catherine, and such saints, they mutter, "Our Father." So far are the priests from concerning themselves with curing or restraining this madness that, attracted by the odor of gain, they approve and applaud it

But it greatly dishonors Christ:

How much farther has this devilish insolence spread when men do not hesitate to transfer to the dead what properly belonged to God and Christ?

C. Confused Interpretation of Scripture Used to Support Intercession of Saints

1. Aa
2. Aa
- 3.

D. The Departed Saints Not Engaged in Earthly Cares

E. Invocation of the Names of the Patriarchs Not Relevant

F. The Saints Have Prayed as We Ought to Pray

G. Concluding Refutation of the Doctrine of the Intercession of Saints

V. Kinds of Prayer, Public and Private (*Institutes* 3.20.28-30)

A. Private Prayer

1. Calvin divides private prayer into two main headings: intercession and thanksgiving

In asking and beseeching, we pour out our desires before God, seeking both those things which make for the extension of his glory and the setting forth of his name, and those benefits which conduce to our own advantage. In giving thanks, we celebrate with due praise his benefits toward us, and credit to his generosity every good that comes to us. David, therefore, has combined these two functions: "Call upon me in the day of need; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me" [Psalm 50:15]. Scripture with good reason enjoins us to use both constantly.

2. Our constant neediness alone should drive us to constant prayer

For as we have stated elsewhere, the weight of our poverty and the facts of experience proclaim that the tribulations which drive and press us from all sides are so many and so great that there is reason enough for us all continually to groan and sigh to God, and to beseech him as suppliants. For even if they be free of adversities, the guilt of their transgressions and the innumerable assaults of temptations ought still to goad even the holiest to seek a remedy.

3. How much more should God's constant and astonishing goodness drive us continually to thanksgiving?

But in the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving there can be no interruption without sin, since God does not cease to heap benefits upon benefits in order to impel us, though slow and lazy, to gratefulness, short, we are well-nigh overwhelmed by so great and so plenteous an outpouring of benefactions, by so many and mighty miracles discerned wherever one looks, that we never lack reason and occasion for praise and thanksgiving.

4. Calvin heaps up Biblical examples of this thanksgiving:

David, when he has perceived the Lord's generosity, beautifully declares a "new song" has been put into his mouth [^{<194003>}Psalm 40:3]. By this he naturally hints that if we fail to offer him praise for his blessing, our silence is

spiteful, since as often as he blesses us he provides us with occasion to bless him. So Isaiah also, proclaiming God's singular grace, urges believers to a new and uncommon song [Isaiah 42:10]. In this sense, David elsewhere speaks: "O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise" [Psalm 51:15]. In like manner, Hezekiah and Jonah testify that this will be the outcome of their deliverance: that they may sing the praises of God's goodness in the Temple [Isaiah 38:20; Jonah 2:9]. David prescribes the same rule to all the godly in common. "What shall I render to the Lord," he says, "for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord." [Psalm 116:12-13]

5. Our praises must flow from our love relationship with God

Not only do God's benefits claim for themselves the extolling by the tongue, but also they naturally win love for themselves. "I loved the Lord," says David, "because he heard the voice of my supplication." [Psalm 116:1] Also, elsewhere recounting what help he had experienced: "I shall love thee, O God, my strength" [Psalm 18:1 p.]. But praises that do not flow from this sweetness of love will never please God.

6. A sacrifice of praise is only acceptable to God through Christ's blood

Now even as we have taught that by Christ's intercession are consecrated our prayers, which would otherwise have been unclean, so the apostle, enjoining us to offer a sacrifice of praise through Christ [Hebrews 13:15], warns us that our mouths are not clean enough to sing the praises of God's name until Christ's priesthood intercedes for us.

B. Necessity and Danger of Public Prayer

1. The church must have set and agreed-upon times of public worship and prayer

Yet [public prayers] can neither be constant nor ought they even to take place otherwise than according to the polity agreed upon by common consent among all. This I grant you. For this reason, certain hours, indifferent to God but necessary for men's convenience, are agreed upon and appointed to provide for the accommodation of all, and for everything to be done "decently and in order" in the church, according to Paul's statement [1 Corinthians 14:40]. But this does not preclude each church from being both repeatedly stirred up to more frequent use of prayer and fired by a sharper zeal if it is alerted by some major need.

2. The presence of a crowd of people is a special temptation in prayer; we need to be careful that we are not praying to be praised by men

Matthew 6:5-6 "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. ⁶ But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

3. But that doesn't mean we can't pray in public... just that we need to be careful over our hearts when we do

For he did not mean to deny that it is fitting to pray in other places, but he shows that prayer is something secret, which is both principally lodged in the heart and requires a tranquility far from all our teeming cares. The Lord himself also, therefore, with good reason, when he determined to devote himself more intensely to prayers, habitually withdrew to a quiet spot far away from the tumult of men; but he did so to impress us with his example that we must not neglect these helps, whereby our mind, too unsteady by itself, more inclines to earnest application to prayer. In the meantime, as he did not abstain from praying even in the midst of a crowd if the occasion so presented itself, so we should lift up clean hands in all places, where there is need [1 Timothy 2:8]. Finally, we must consider that whoever refused to pray in the holy assembly of the godly knows not what it is to pray individually, or in a secret spot, or at home. Again, he who neglects to pray alone and in private, however unremittingly he may frequent public assemblies, there contrives only windy prayers, for he defers more to the opinion of men than to the secret judgment of God.

C. Not Church Buildings But We Ourselves Are Temples of God

1. Calvin asserted that the building of buildings for public worship is acceptable based on the example of the Temple, a "house of prayer for all nations"
2. However, he asserted the key is the heart of the people... the true temple is our hearts:

If this is the lawful use of church buildings, as it certainly is, we in turn must guard against either taking them to be God's proper dwelling places, whence he may more nearly incline his ear to us – as they began to be regarded some centuries ago – or feigning for them some secret holiness or other, which would render prayer more sacred before God. For since we ourselves are God's true temples, if we would call upon God in his holy temple, we must pray within ourselves.

VI. The Use of Singing and of the Spoken Language (*Institutes 3.20.31-33*)

A. On Speaking and Singing in Prayer

1. The singing must come from our hearts or it is worthless

From this, moreover, it is fully evident that unless voice and song, if interposed in prayer, spring from deep feeling of heart, neither has any value or profit in the least with God. **F561** But they arouse his wrath against us if they come only from the tip of the lips and from the throat, seeing that this is to abuse his most holy name and to hold his majesty in derision. This is what we gather from Isaiah's words, which, although they extend farther, also are concerned with reproving this fault, "The people," he says, "draw near to me with their mouth, and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, and they have feared me by the command and teaching of men." [Isaiah 29:13; cf. Matthew 15:8-9.]

2. True spiritual singing is commendable and desirable

Yet we do not here condemn speaking and singing but rather strongly commend them, provided they are associated with the heart's affection. For thus do they exercise the mind in thinking of God and keep it attentive – unstable and variable as it is, and readily relaxed and diverted in different directions, unless it be supported by various helps. Moreover, since the glory of God ought, in a measure, to shine in the several parts of our bodies, it is especially fitting that the tongue has been assigned and destined for this task, both through singing and through speaking. For it was peculiarly created to tell and proclaim the praise of God.

B. Church Singing

1. It was clearly part of the early church, as various passages in Paul attest
2. But Calvin traces out church history in Milan during the time of Ambrose, who reestablished church singing
3. Calvin asserts that singing is a gift of God

And surely, if the singing be tempered to that gravity which is fitting in the sight of God and the angels, it both lends dignity and grace to sacred actions and has the greatest value in kindling our hearts to a true zeal and eagerness to pray. Yet we should be very careful that our ears be not more attentive to the melody than our minds to the spiritual meaning of the words.

... such songs as have been composed only for sweetness and delight of the ear are unbecoming to the majesty of the church and cannot but displease God in the highest degree.

C. Prayer Should Be in the Language of the People

1. The Roman Catholic church made Latin the universal language of all church services... unintelligible to the people

2. Calvin was against this

From this also it plainly appears that public prayers must be couched not in Greek among the Latins, nor in Latin among the French or English, as has heretofore been the custom, but in the language of the people, which can be generally understood by the whole assembly. For this ought to be done for the edification of the whole church, which receives no benefit whatever from a sound not understood.

3. Clearly, Calvin's support for this came from Paul in 1 Corinthians 14

"If you bless with the spirit," he says, "how can he who occupies the place of the unlearned respond to your blessing with 'Amen,' since he is ignorant of what you are saying? For you indeed give thanks, but the other is not edified."

[1 Corinthians 14:16-17]

4. Some of the best prayers are altogether unspoken

Lastly, we should hold that the tongue is not even necessary for private prayer, except in so far as either the inner feeling has insufficient power to arouse itself or as it is so vehemently aroused that it carries with it the action of the tongue. For even though the best prayers are sometimes unspoken, it often happens in practice that, when feelings of mind are aroused, unostentatiously the tongue breaks forth into speech, and the other members into gesture. From this obviously arose that uncertain murmur of Hannah's [1 Samuel 1:13], something similar to which all the saints continually experience when they burst forth into broken and fragmentary speech.

VII. An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer (*Institutes 3.20.34-47*)

A. The Lord's Prayer a Necessary Help for Us

B. Division and Main Content

C. "Our Father in heaven"

1. Initial comments

2. A form of address that should encourage us

3. A form of address that sets us in the fellowship with the brethren

4. Comparison of prayer and almsgiving

5. "... in heaven"

D. The Petitions

1. The First Petition: May your name be hallowed

2. The Second Petition: May your Kingdom come

3. The Third Petition: May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven

4. Summary of first three petitions

5. The Fourth Petition: Give us this day our daily bread

6. The Fifth Petition: Forgive our debts... as we also forgive our debtors

7. The Sixth Petition: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

E. The Conclusion

F. The Adequacy of the Lord's Prayer, and Our Freedom to Use Other Words
(3.20.48-49)

1. The Lord's Prayer as a binding rule

2. The Lord's Prayer does not bind us to its form of words but to its content

VIII. Special Times of Prayer, and the Need for Perseverance (*Institutes 3.20.50-52*)

A. Prayer at Regular Times

B. Patient Perseverance in Prayer

C. Unheard Prayers?

**John Calvin on the Prayer Life of the Believer:
Part III**

- I. The Nature and Value of Prayer (*Institutes 3.20.1-3*)
- II. The Rules of Right Prayer (*Institutes 3.20.4-16*)
- III. The Intercession of Christ (*Institutes 3.20.17-20*)
- IV. Erroneous Doctrines of the Prayers of Saints (*Institutes 3.20.21-27*)
- V. Kinds of Prayer, Public and Private (*Institutes 3.20.28-30*)
- VI. The Use of Singing and of the Spoken Language (*Institutes 3.20.31-33*)
- VII. An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer (*Institutes 3.20.34-47*)

- A. The Lord's Prayer a Necessary Help for Us

Calvin highlights the benefits of the Lord's Prayer in that it teaches us what we may ask for and frees us from doubts as we approach God:

since he saw that we did not even sufficiently perceive how straitened our poverty was, what it was fair to request, and what was profitable for us, he also provided for this ignorance of ours; and what had been lacking to our capacity he himself supplied and made sufficient from his own. For he prescribed a form for us in which he set forth as in a table all that he allows us to seek of him, all that is of benefit to us, all that we need ask. From this kindness of his we receive great fruit of consolation: that we know we are requesting nothing absurd, nothing strange or unseemly – in short, nothing unacceptable to him – since we are asking almost in his own words. ... [And here] he discloses our unhappiness, in that we cannot even open our mouths before God without danger unless the Spirit instructs us in the right pattern for prayer [Romans 8:16]. This privilege deserves to be more highly esteemed among us, since the only begotten Son of God supplies words to our lips that free our minds from all wavering

- B. Division and Main Content

1. The Lord's Prayer consists of six petitions
2. The first three focus on God's glory, which we should delight in, no matter what comes our way as a result
3. The last three focus on care for ourselves, and focus our minds on what helps we should be seeking from God
4. However, a yearning for God's glory should characterize our heart attitude throughout prayer

... when we ask that God's name be hallowed, because God wills to test us whether we love and worship him freely or for hope of reward, we must then have no consideration for our own benefit but must set before ourselves his glory, to gaze with eyes intent upon this one thing.

...

But our eyes ought, as it were, to be closed and in a sense blinded to this sort of advantage, so that they have no regard for it at all, and so that, if all hope of our own private good were cut off, still we should not cease to desire and entreat this hallowing and the other things that pertain to God's glory. In the examples of Moses and Paul, we see that it was not grievous for them to turn their minds and eyes away from themselves and to long for their own destruction with fierce and burning zeal in order that, despite their own loss, they might advance God's glory and Kingdom :

Exodus 32:32 But now, please forgive their sin-- but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written."

Romans 9:3-4 For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, ⁴ the people of Israel.

On the other hand, when we ask to be given our daily bread, even though we desire what is to our benefit, here also we ought especially to seek God's glory so as not to ask it unless it redound to his glory.

C. "Our Father in heaven"

1. Initial comments

- a. The address of God as Father immediately should cause us to think of Christ, and our adoption in Him

For in calling God "Father," we put forward the name "Christ." With what confidence would anyone address God as "Father"? Who would break forth into such rashness as to claim for himself the honor of a son of God unless we had been adopted as children of grace in Christ? He, while he is the true Son, has of himself been given us as a brother that what he has of his own by nature may become ours by benefit of adoption if we embrace this great blessing with sure faith. Accordingly, John says that power has been given to those who believe in the name of the only-begotten Son of God, that they too may become children of God [John 1:12].

- b. This name "Father" should also give us a strong sense of confidence in approaching God

Therefore God both calls himself our Father and would have us so address him. By the great sweetness of this name he frees us from all distrust, since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father. Therefore he could not attest his own boundless love toward us with any surer proof than the fact that we are called “children of God” [1 John 3:1]. But just as he surpasses all men in goodness and mercy, so is his love greater and more excellent than all our parents’ love. Hence, though all earthly fathers should divest themselves of all feeling of fatherhood and forsake their children, he will never fail us [cf. Psalm 27:10; Isaiah 63:16], since he cannot deny himself [2 Timothy 2:13].

- c. The name “Father” should also teach us to seek all blessings from Him and from no other, because to go somewhere else for help would be to dishonor Him as a bad father:

But a son cannot give himself over to the safekeeping of a stranger and an alien without at the same time complaining either of his father’s cruelty or want. Thus, if we are his sons, we cannot seek help anywhere else than from him without reproaching him for poverty, or want of means, or cruelty and excessive rigor.

2. A form of address that should encourage us

- a. Our constant consciousness of sins tends to make us feel ashamed as we approach God in prayer
- b. But a normal, loving father is moved deeply by a sinful son’s honest and tearful pleading for forgiveness; how much more our heavenly Father!
- c. The Parable of the Prodigal Son is ample proof of this warm welcome to repentant sinners

He depicts and represents for us in a parable [Luke 15:11-32] this abundance of fatherly compassion: a son had estranged himself from his father, had dissolutely wasted his substance [verse 13], had grievously offended against him in every way [verse 18]; but the father embraces him with open arms, and does not wait for him to ask for pardon but anticipates him, recognizes him returning afar off, willingly runs to meet him [verse 20], comforts him, receives him into favor [verses 22-24]. For in setting forth this example of great compassion to be seen in man, he willed to teach us how much more abundantly we ought to expect it of him. For he is not only a father but by far the best and kindest of all fathers, provided we still cast ourselves upon his mercy, although we are ungrateful, rebellious, and [habitually disobedient] children. And to strengthen our assurance that he is this sort of father to us if we are Christians, he willed that we call him not only “Father” but explicitly “our Father.”

- d. So also the ministry of the Holy Spirit within us helps us understand God as our Father

But because the narrowness of our hearts cannot comprehend God's boundless favor, not only is Christ the pledge and guarantee of our adoption, but he gives the Spirit as witness to us of the same adoption, through whom with free and full voice we may cry, "Abba, Father" [Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:15]. Therefore, whenever any hesitation shall hinder us, let us remember to ask him to correct our fearfulness, and to set before us that Spirit that he may guide us to pray boldly.

- 3. A form of address that sets us in the fellowship with the brethren

However, we are not so instructed that each one of us should individually call him *his Father*, but rather that all of us in common should call him *our Father*. From this fact we are warned how great a feeling of brotherly love ought to be among us, since by the same right of mercy and free liberality we are equally children of such a father. For if one father is common to us all [Matthew 23:9], and every good thing that can fall to our lot comes from him, there ought not to be anything separate among us that we are not prepared gladly and wholeheartedly to share with one another, as far as occasion requires.

.... we ought to be drawn with a special affection to those, above others, of the household of faith, whom the apostle has particularly commended to us in everything [Galatians 6:10]. To sum up, all prayers ought to be such as to look to that community which our Lord has established in his Kingdom and his household

- 4. Comparison of prayer and almsgiving

- a. Our praying primarily for the household of faith is like how our almsgiving should be directed primarily for believers; but that in both cases, we can be generous to outsiders
- b. Yet, prayer is not like almsgiving, in that we can be generous in our prayers to people whom we do not even know and cannot personally interact with; from afar, we can pray for Kings and those in authority, and others whose situation we are aware of

- 5. "... in heaven"

- a. The addition of this phrase does not enclose God in some kind of boundary like a prison; Solomon worships God saying "heaven, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you" (1 Kings 8:27)
- b. Rather this phrase helps us exalt God to the highest place in our estimation:

Consequently, it has been signified to us by "heaven," for we can behold nothing more sublime or majestic than this. While, therefore, wherever our senses comprehend anything they commonly attach it to that place, God is set beyond all place, so that when we would seek him we must rise above all perception of body and soul. Secondly, by this expression he is lifted above all chance of either corruption or change. Finally, it signifies that he embraces and holds together the entire universe and controls it by his might. Therefore it is as if he had been said to be of infinite greatness or loftiness, of incomprehensible essence, of boundless might, and of everlasting immortality.

- c. This helps us understand the greatness of God's sovereign power as we pray:

But while we hear this, our thought must be raised higher when God is spoken of, lest we dream up anything earthly or physical about him, lest we measure him by our small measure, or conform his will to our emotions. At the same time our confidence in him must be aroused, since we understand that heaven and earth are ruled by his providence and power.

D. The Petitions

1. The First Petition: May your name be hallowed

- a. It is shameful for us as a human race even to have to pray this; there is nothing more shameful than that God's glory has been in some sense obscured by our idolatry and ignorance
- b. What are we asking in this petition?

... we should wish God to have the honor he deserves; men should never speak or think of him without the highest reverence. To this is opposed the profanity that has always been too common and even today is abroad in the world. Hence the need of this petition, which ought to have been superfluous if even a little godliness existed among us. But if holiness is associated with God's name where separated from all other names it breathes pure glory, here we are bidden to request not only that God vindicate his sacred name of all contempt and dishonor but also that he subdue the whole race of mankind to reverence for it.

- c. God reveals His glory both in His works and in His word; but only as Scripture takes its proper place in our hearts will this petition be answered

- d. Summary:

... the petition is directed also to this end: that all impiety which has besmirched this holy name may perish and be wiped out; that all detractions

and mockeries which dim this hallowing or diminish it may be banished; and that in silencing all sacrileges, God may shine forth more and more in his majesty.

2. The Second Petition: May your Kingdom come

- a. In some sense this is a thematic repetition of the first request, “Hallowed by your name”... as if we could say the coming of God’s Kingdom IS the hallowing of His name”
- b. What is God’s “Kingdom”?

God reigns where men, both by denial of themselves and by contempt of the world and of earthly life, pledge themselves to his righteousness in order to aspire to a heavenly life. Thus there are two parts to this Kingdom: first, that God by the power of his Spirit correct all the desires of the flesh which by squadrons war against him; second, that he shape all our thoughts in obedience to his rule.

- c. The Kingdom advances in two ways: 1) when men gladly come under the scepter of God’s Word; 2) when God uses His sovereign power to crush opposition. Both of these humbles human pride:

Now, because the word of God is like a royal scepter, we are bidden here to entreat him to bring all men’s minds and hearts into voluntary obedience to it. This happens when he manifests the working of his word through the secret inspiration of his Spirit in order that it may stand forth in the degree of honor that it deserves. Afterward we should descend to the impious, who stubbornly and with desperate madness resist his authority. Therefore God sets up his Kingdom by humbling the whole world, but in different ways. For he tames the wantonness of some, breaks the untamable pride of others.

- d. This is a prayer for daily progress... a MISSIONARY prayer:

We must daily desire that God gather churches unto himself from all parts of the earth; that he spread and increase them in number; that he adorn them with gifts; that he establish a lawful order among them; on the other hand, that he cast down all enemies of pure teaching and religion; that he scatter their counsels and crush their efforts.

- e. Despite the obvious setbacks the church endures, this prayer is never in vain; but full consummation of it awaits the Second Coming of Christ:

From this it appears that zeal for daily progress is not enjoined upon us in vain, for it never goes so well with human affairs that the filthiness of vices is shaken and washed away, and full integrity flowers and grows, But its

fullness is delayed to the final coming of Christ when, as Paul teaches, “God will be all in all” [1 Corinthians 15:28].

f. What effect this petition should have on our hearts:

Thus this prayer ought to draw us back from worldly corruptions, which so separate us from God that his Kingdom does not thrive within us. At the same time it ought to kindle zeal for mortification of the flesh; finally, it ought to instruct us in bearing the cross. For it is in this way that God wills to spread his Kingdom.

g. How the Kingdom spreads

But we should not take it ill that the outward man is in decay, provided the inner man is renewed [2 Corinthians 4:16]! For this is the condition of God’s Kingdom: that while we submit to his righteousness, he makes us sharers in his glory. This comes to pass when, with ever-increasing splendor, he displays his light and truth, by which the darkness and falsehoods of Satan’s kingdom vanish, are extinguished, and pass away. Meanwhile, he protects his own, guides them by the help of his Spirit into uprightness, and strengthens them to perseverance. But he overthrows the wicked conspiracies of enemies, unravels their stratagems and deceits, opposes their malice, represses their obstinacy, until at last he slays Antichrist with the Spirit of his mouth and destroys all ungodliness by the brightness of his coming [2 Thessalonians 2:8].

3. The Third Petition: May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven

- a. This is also connected very plainly to the previous petition; in effect it is a further explanation of what it means to have God’s Kingdom come
- b. There is a distinction between the secret will of God and the revealed, commanded will of God; this petition refers to the latter... people voluntarily and gladly obeying God’s Kingly commands

But here God’s other will is to be noted – namely, that to which voluntary obedience corresponds – and for that reason, heaven is by name compared to earth, for the angels, as is said in the psalm, willingly obey God, and are intent upon carrying out his commands [Psalm 103:20]. We are therefore bidden to desire that, just as in heaven nothing is done apart from God’s good pleasure, and the angels dwell together in all peace and uprightness, the earth be in like manner subject to such a rule, with all arrogance and wickedness brought to an end.

- c. This prayer causes us to renounce the desires of the flesh and learn by the Holy Spirit to desire only what God wills

And in asking this we renounce the desires of our flesh; for whoever does not resign and submit his feelings to God opposes as much as he can God's will, since only what is corrupt comes forth from us. And again by this prayer we are formed to self-denial so God may rule us according to his decision. And not this alone but also so he may create new minds and hearts in us [cf. Psalm 51:20], ours having been reduced to nothing in order for us to feel in ourselves no prompting of desire but pure agreement with his will. In sum, so we may wish nothing from ourselves but his Spirit may govern our hearts; and while the Spirit is inwardly teaching us we may learn to love the things that please him and to hate those which displease him. In consequence, our wish is that he may render futile and of no account whatever feelings are incompatible with his will.

4. Summary of first three petitions

Here, then, are the first three sections of the prayer. In making these requests we are to keep God's glory alone before our eyes, while leaving ourselves out of consideration and not looking to any advantage for ourselves; for such advantage, even though it amply accrues from such a prayer, must not be sought by us here. But even though all these things must nonetheless come to pass in their time, without any thought or desire or petition of ours, still we ought to desire and request them. And it is of no slight value for us to do this. Thus, we may testify and profess ourselves servants and children of God, zealously, truly, and deeply committed, to the best of our ability, to his honor. This we owe our Lord and Father. Therefore, men who do not, with this desire and zeal to further God's glory, pray that "God's name be hallowed," that "his Kingdom come," that "his will be done," should not be reckoned among God's children and servants; and inasmuch as all these things will come to pass even against such men's consent, the result will be their confusion and destruction.

5. The Fourth Petition: Give us this day our daily bread

- a. Now we are allowed to "descend" to the level of our own needs; but in doing so, we do not forsake concern for God's glory; for Paul tells us that we should eat and drink and do everything for the glory of God

God specifically claims the first three petitions and draws us wholly to himself to prove our piety in this way. Then he allows us to look after our own interests, yet under this limitation: that we seek nothing for ourselves without the intention that whatever benefits he confers upon us may show forth his glory, for nothing is more fitting than that we live and die to him [Romans 14:7-9].

- b. What this petition focuses on: the preservation of our bodies

But by this petition we ask of God all things in general that our bodies have need to use under the elements of this world [Galatians 4:3], not only for food and clothing but also for everything God perceives to be beneficial to us, that we may eat our daily bread in peace. Briefly, by this we give ourselves over to his care, and entrust ourselves to his providence, that he may feed, nourish, and preserve us. For our most gracious Father does not disdain to take even our bodies under his safekeeping and guardianship in order to exercise our faith in these small matters, while we expect everything from him, even to a crumb of bread and a drop of water.

- c. Even here, however, we should not be like the pagans, who clearly show more concern for the body than for the soul
- d. This prayer teaches us not to be worried about our lives, what we shall eat or drink, or about our bodies, what we shall wear. Instead we are trained by this to ask God for our bodily needs, and leave it to Him
- e. Why does this petition precede the one on forgiveness of sins, since that is clearly the greater need?

Now even though forgiveness of sins is far more important than bodily nourishment, Christ placed the inferior thing first that he might bring us gradually to the two remaining petitions, which properly belong to the heavenly life. In this he has taken account of our slowness.

- f. The helpful effect of this petition on our own hearts: it teaches us to be humble with our portion (giving God the credit) and to learn our total dependence on Him:

But we are bidden to ask our daily bread that we may be content with the measure that our Heavenly Father has deigned to distribute to us, and not get gain by unlawful devices. Meanwhile, we must hold that it is made ours by title of gift; for, as is said in Moses, neither effort nor toil, nor our hands, acquire anything for us by themselves but by God's blessing [Leviticus 26:20; cf. Deuteronomy 8:17-18]. Indeed, not even an abundance of bread would benefit us in the slightest unless it were divinely turned into nourishment. Accordingly, this generosity of God is necessary no less for the rich than for the poor; for with full cellars and storehouses, men would faint with thirst and hunger unless they enjoyed their bread through his grace

- g. This petition teaches us that, though God may use bread to sustain our lives, yet the true sustaining of our lives is His will; even rich people with full larders and wine cellars must have God's grace to continue to live even for one moment

By this he shows it is by his power alone that life and strength are sustained, even though he administers it to us by physical means.

- h. The word “daily” teaches us to be satisfied with what is necessary to sustain life, and frees us from hoarding and from self-reliance!!

The word “today,” or “day by day,” as it is in the other Evangelist, as well as the adjective “daily,” bridle the uncontrolled desire for fleeting things, with which we commonly burn without measure, and to which other evils are added. For if a greater abundance is at hand, we vainly pour it out upon pleasure, delights, ostentation, and other sorts of excess. Therefore we are bidden to ask only as much as is sufficient for our need from day to day, with this assurance: that as our Heavenly Father nourishes us today, he will not fail us tomorrow.

- i. Finally, this petition also teaches us that it is ultimately God’s blessing on our labors and not our labors themselves that

The fact that we ask that it be given us signifies that it is a simple and free gift of God, however it may come to us, even when it would seem to have been obtained from our own skill and diligence, and supplied by our own hands. For it is by his blessing alone that our labors truly prosper.

- 6. The Fifth Petition: Forgive our debts... as we also forgive our debtors
 - a. How the fifth and sixth petition relate to each other

With this and the following petition, Christ briefly embraces all that makes for the heavenly life, as the spiritual covenant that God has made for the salvation of his church rests on these two members alone: “I shall write my laws upon their hearts,” and, “I shall be merciful toward their iniquity” [Jeremiah 31:33]. Here Christ begins with forgiveness of sins, then presently adds the second grace: that God protect us by the power of his Spirit and sustain us by his aid so we may stand unvanquished against all temptations.

- b. Why Christ calls our sins “debts”:

He calls sins “debts” because we owe penalty for them, and we could in no way satisfy it unless we were released by this forgiveness. This pardon comes of his free mercy, by which he himself generously wipes out these debts, exacting no payment from us but making satisfaction to himself by his own mercy in Christ, who once for all gave himself as a ransom [cf. Romans 3:24]

- c. People who are trusting in their own works to pay for their sins don’t need to pray this prayer and receive nothing from God in this area
- d. Such sinless perfection is impossible in this world, because God has chosen to save us only gradually from our defilement

Because it pleases God gradually to restore his image in us, in such a manner that some taint always remains in our flesh, it was most necessary to provide a remedy. ... Christ, according to the authority given him by his Father, commands us throughout life to resort to prayer for the pardon of our guilt...

e. *“As we forgive our debtors...”* what this means

we petition that forgiveness come to us, “as we forgive our debtors” [Matthew 6:12]: namely, as we spare and pardon all who have in any way injured us, either treating us unjustly in deed or insulting us in word.

Not that it is ours to forgive the guilt of transgression or offense, for this belongs to God alone [cf. Isaiah 43:25]! This, rather, is our forgiveness: willingly to cast from the mind wrath, hatred, desire for revenge, and willingly to banish to oblivion the remembrance of injustice.

f. Forsaking unforgiveness is essential to our own forgiveness

If we retain feelings of hatred in our hearts, if we plot revenge and ponder any occasion to cause harm, and even if we do not try to get back into our enemies’ good graces, by every sort of good office deserve well of them, and commend ourselves to them, by this prayer we entreat God not to forgive our sins. For we ask that he do to us as we do to others [cf. Matthew 7:12]. This, indeed, is to petition him not to do it to us unless we ourselves do it. What do people of this sort gain from their petition but a heavier judgment?

g. This petition is also a source of assurance to our weakness... the logic is, if we who are so evil have been able to forgive others when they sin against us, how much more willing and compassionate is God to forgive us?

7. The Sixth Petition: Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

a. This petition relates to the engraving of God’s Law in our hearts; but it also relates to the realization that Satan is powerful in this world, seeking to pull us from the path of God’s Law

The sixth petition [Matthew 6:13], as we have said, corresponds to the promise that the law is to be engraved upon our hearts [Proverbs 3:3; 2 Corinthians 3:3], but because we obey God not without continual warfare and hard and trying struggles, here we seek to be equipped with such armor and defended with such protection that we may be able to win the victory. By this we are instructed that we need not only the grace of the Spirit, to soften our hearts within and to bend and direct them to obey God, but also his aid, to render us invincible against both all the stratagems and all the violent assaults of Satan.

b. The nature of temptations: of two sorts—extreme success or extreme trial

Now the forms of temptations are indeed many and varied. For wicked conceptions of the mind, provoking us to transgress the law, which either our own inordinate desire suggests to us or the devil prompts, are temptations, as are things not evil of their own nature yet which become temptations through the devil's devices, when they are so thrust before our eyes that by their appearance we are drawn away or turn aside from God [James 1:2,14; cf. Matthew 4:1,3; 1 Thessalonians 3:5]. And these temptations are either from the right or from the left. From the right are, for example, riches, power, honors, which often dull men's keenness of sight by the glitter and seeming goodness they display, and allure with their blandishments, so that, captivated by such tricks and drunk with such sweetness, men forget their God. From the left are, for example, poverty, disgrace, contempt, afflictions, and the like. Thwarted by the hardship and difficulty of these, they become despondent in mind, cast away assurance and hope, and are at last completely estranged from God.

- c. We pray for deliverance IN the temptations, not that we have no temptations at all

Nevertheless, we do not here ask that we feel no temptations at all, for we need, rather, to be aroused, pricked, and urged by them, lest, with too much inactivity, we grow sluggish. For it is not beside the point that David wished to be tempted [cf. Psalm 26:2], and it is not without cause that the Lord daily tests his elect [Genesis 22:1; Deuteronomy 8:2; 13:3], chastising them by disgrace, poverty, tribulation, and other sorts of affliction

- d. The difference between "trials" (from God) and "temptations" (from Satan)

But God tries in one way, Satan in another. Satan tempts that he may destroy, condemn, confound, cast down, but God, that by proving his own children he may make trial of their sincerity, and establish their strength by exercising it; that he may mortify, purify, and cauterize their flesh, which unless it were forced under this restraint would play the wanton and vaunt itself beyond measure. Besides, Satan attacks those who are unarmed and unprepared that he may crush them unaware. God, along with the temptation, makes a way of escape, that his own may be able patiently to bear all that he imposes upon them [1 Corinthians 10:13; 2 Peter 2:9].

- e. It is too difficult for us to face Satan alone

Here we must carefully note that it is not in our power to engage that great warrior the devil in combat, or to bear his force and onslaught. Otherwise it would be pointless or a mockery to ask of God what we already have in ourselves. Obviously those who prepare for such a combat with self-assurance do not sufficiently understand with what a ferocious and well-equipped

enemy they have to deal. Now we seek to be freed from his power, as from the jaws of a mad and raging lion [1 Peter 5:8]; if the Lord did not snatch us from the midst of death, we could not help being immediately torn to pieces by his fangs and claws, and swallowed down his throat. Yet we know that if the Lord be with us, and fight for us while we keep still, "in his might we shall do mightily" [Psalm 60:12; cf. Psalm 107:14]. Let others trust as they will in their own capacities and powers of free choice, which they seem to themselves to possess. For us let it be enough that we stand and are strong in God's power alone.

f. Why should we pray "Lead us not into temptation" when James tells us that God never tempts us?

The question has already been partly solved, because our lust is properly the cause of all temptations that vanquish us [James 1:14], and therefore bears the blame. And James means only that it is futile and unjust to transfer to God those vices which we are compelled to impute to ourselves because we know ourselves to be guilty of them. But this does not prevent God, when it seems good to him, from turning us over to Satan, from casting us into a reprobate mind and foul desires, and from leading us into temptations, by a just but often secret judgment. For the cause has often been hidden from men, while it is certain with him. From this we gather it is not an improper expression, if we are convinced that with good reason he threatens so many times to give sure proofs of his vengeance, when he strikes the reprobate with blindness and hardness of heart.

E. The Conclusion: "Amen"

At the end is added, "Amen" [Matthew 6:13, marg.]. By it is expressed the warmth of desire to obtain what we have asked of God. And our hope is strengthened that all things of this sort have already been brought to pass, and will surely be granted to us, since they have been promised by God, who cannot deceive. And this agrees with the form of prayer we previously set forth: "Do, O Lord, for thy name's sake, not on account of us or our righteousness" [cf. Daniel 9:18-19]. By this the saints not only express the end of their prayers but confess themselves unworthy to obtain it unless God seeks the reason from himself, and that their confidence of being heard stems solely from God's nature.